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# Morality Predicts Enjoyment But Not Appreciation of Morally Ambiguous Characters

ALLISON EDEN

*Department of Communication Science, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

SERENA DAALMANS

*Department of Communication Science, Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

BENJAMIN K. JOHNSON

*Department of Communication Science, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

*Understanding the role of morally ambiguous characters such as anti-heroes in entertainment experiences has become a central concern for media researchers. Some have argued that different character schemas or tropes may vary along specific moral domains, whereas others promote a linear progression of moral violation from hero to villain. This study presents the results of survey data (N = 294) examining the perceptions of established character tropes in terms of character morality, enjoyment, and appreciation responses. Popular perceptions of character tropes drawn from the website TV Tropes did not significantly differ in terms of which moral domains they upheld or violated, but demonstrated a linear progression of moral violation across five domains of morality. Perceptions of character tropes also did not differ significantly in associations with enjoyment, appreciation, or variables drawn from character identification literature such as self-expansion,*

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Address correspondence to Allison Eden, Department of Communication Science, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1081 De Boelelaan, Amsterdam 1081HV, The Netherlands. E-mail: [a.eden@vu.nl](mailto:a.eden@vu.nl)

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*wishful identification, or homophily. When examining media responses, however, self-expansion, wishful identification, and moral violation were all strongly related to enjoyment. Unlike enjoyment, appreciation was not related to moral violation. These results are discussed in terms of hedonic and eudaimonic responses to characters.*

Media psychologists (Eden, Oliver, Tamborini, Limperos, & Woolley, 2015; Konijn & Hoon, 2005; Raney, 2004; Sanders, 2010; Zillmann, 2000) have tried to explain the mechanisms steering how we perceive, respond to, and enjoy media characters. Most often, this research has examined viewer responses to particular characters in television and film. However, viewer responses may vary based on particulars of each specific character, making generalizing to theory difficult from specific examples. It may be that viewers respond in similar fashion to characters based on their representation of particular schemas, such as the hero, villain, or anti-hero (Raney, 2004). Understanding which schemas provoke which types of responses may, in turn, be best understood by analyzing viewer perceptions of commonly occurring characters types, or tropes. Therefore, in the current study, we use consensus-driven perceptions of character tropes in order to better understand how different character types are associated with enjoyment, appreciation, identification, and self-expansion.

We begin with enjoyment, as it has always been central to understanding responses to characters. One of the most commonly applied theories to explain responses to characters in media is affective disposition theory (ADT; Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). This theory states that whether we like or dislike characters (how we form our affective dispositions) is based on our judgment of the morality of these characters. We rejoice when the hero, who we judge to be “good” based on our own conceptualization of morality, triumphs over the villain, who we judge deserving of this punishment (in simpler terms, “bad”) based on his or her moral violations. However, morality-based disposition formation processes may not apply as cleanly to narratives featuring morally ambiguous characters as they do to “pure” hero and villain characters. Recent research has addressed this gap by broadening the focus of character types to include morally ambiguous characters (MACs; Eden, Grizzard, & Lewis, 2011; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2014; Shafer & Raney, 2012; van Ommen, Daalman, & Weijers, 2014). These studies have primarily focused on the role of character moral ambiguity in predicting enjoyment. However, there has been debate about whether morally ambiguous characters vary along one continuum of morality (i.e., from good to bad) or if they vary along separate domains of morality (cf. Eden et al., 2015). Specifically, Eden et al. (2015) found that heroes and villains upheld and violated different domains of morality, however only among pure heroes and villains. Therefore, the first goal of this study is to examine the role of moral domains in distinguishing perceptions of character types beyond hero and villain.

Yet, it may be important also to understand how broader perceptions of these morally mixed character types affect not just enjoyment but also other positively valenced evaluations such as appreciation or search for meaning, which are distinct from hedonic responses to media. These types of eudaimonic responses to media have been distinguished from the primarily hedonic enjoyment characterized by disposition theory and broadly termed “appreciation” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). MACs may be more associated with appreciation processes in viewers. MACs may promote reflection of moral conflict and meaning in viewers (Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2014), or expand our self-concept via identification with media characters (Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). In contrast to the enjoyment that is produced by the justice restoration sequence common to narrative, these types of responses may instead be produced by links between the self-concept and the character (whether hero, villain, or MAC; Shedlosky-Shoemaker, Costabile, & Arkin, 2014) or moral conflict presented or encountered by the character (Lewis et al., 2014).

The current study uses a broad survey of perceptions of common character tropes to understand the links between character type, morality, and responses to characters. Results have relevance for understanding how viewers perceive and respond to characters, and suggest mechanisms underlying responses to our common character tropes that move us beyond simple dispositional considerations of characters.

## MORALITY AS CENTRAL TO CHARACTER PERCEPTION

The role of morality in character perception is linked to the use of affective disposition theories to understand narrative enjoyment (Raney, 2004). ADTs are a group of related theories spanning comedy, sports, and drama, which together propose that media enjoyment is based off of watching good people get rewarded and bad people punished (Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). In ADT, disposition formation is reliant on morality, specifically individual considerations of good and bad behavior, such that viewers tend to enjoy watching characters that perform moral actions based on their own personal conceptualizations of morality get rewarded, and enjoy watching characters who violate personal conceptualizations of morality get punished (Zillmann, 2000).

Instead of knowingly evaluating every action during narratives and deliberately weighing the right or wrongness of each behavior, however, viewers tend to use heuristic tools or schemas to make quick evaluative character judgments (Raney, 2004; Sanders, 2010). These schemas are based on past narratives and the experiences the viewer had with them. This way, viewers can quickly understand the role a character plays in a narrative drama. Raney (2004) argues that drama often revolves around a conflict between good and evil characters, so hero and villain schemas are especially well practiced for entertainment viewers. Indeed,

most past approaches to understanding characters have focused on heroes and villains (Eden et al., 2014; Eden et al., 2015; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Tamborini, Grizzard, Eden, & Lewis, 2011).

Yet, characters' morality is more complex than simple white hat–black hat conceptualizations of morality. This can be seen in the increasing emphasis in popular contemporary media of ambivalently moral protagonists battling equally ambivalent antagonists (e.g., Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*, Don Draper in *Mad Men*, Batman in *The Dark Knight*, Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*). A recent study suggests that even though MACs have been part of the television landscape for a long time, over the last years there has been a significant increase in their presence in the television landscape (Daalmans, Hijmans, & Wester, 2013). Therefore, scholars have started to more systematically study characters with less clear-cut morality (e.g., Eden et al., 2011; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Tsay-Vogel, 2013, 2014; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010). Eden et al. (2011) and Tamborini et al. (2010) found that over the course of viewing narrative media, distinct hero, villain, and ambiguously moral characters emerge from ensemble casts, and can be identified by a) how well they uphold or violate moral norms, and b) how well they are rewarded or punished by the narrative, in line with ADT.

Whereas Eden et al. (2011) and Tamborini et al. (2010) examined morality as a unified concept, Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) and Eden et al. (2015) give reason to believe that evaluations of morally ambiguous characters are multi-dimensional rather than one dimensional. As such, a morally ambiguous character may have both positive and negative moral traits, whereas a less morally ambiguous character (i.e., a prototypical hero or villain) would demonstrate moral consistency across a variety of domains, either being all good or all bad.

Eden et al. (2015) tested this theory using a dimensional model of morality known as moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2008), which examines morality across five content areas—harm, fairness, purity, authority, and group loyalty. They found that participant-selected heroes and villains are not judged as uniformly good or bad across all moral dimensions. Instead, participants' self-described heroes violated some domains of morality, such as obedience or authority, and villains upheld other domains of morality, such as group loyalty. However, in a related study, Tamborini et al. (2011) found that character liking was directly related to how well characters upheld or violated morality consistently across all domains of morality. Pure heroes were the most liked, and pure villains the most despised, and in between were a range of morally ambiguous and variably liked characters who classified as neither hero nor villain. Therefore, there is still quite a lot of work to be done in understanding how a wide range of characters falling between hero and villain are perceived and judged in contemporary media.

Part of the issue with understanding characters who are not strictly hero or villains may be in the definition. Where Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) use

the term “morally ambiguous character” to define these characters specifically in terms of moral character, Shafer and Raney (2012), Janicke and Raney (2015), as well as the popular press literature more commonly identify ambiguously moral protagonists as *anti-heroes*. Anti-heroes as protagonists display qualities of both heroes and villains (Lott, 1997), or display flaws relatable to the viewer (Shafer & Raney, 2012). Mackey-Kallis (2001) defines anti-hero as “a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose” (p. 91). Fitch (2005) states “The anti-hero is often a reluctant savior - the one that we follow and adore if only because of his own fallibility and fundamentally flawed human nature. He or she is someone who resembles ourselves, reminding us not only of the ambiguous morality of existence but also the possibility of redemptive change and transcendence” (p. 8).

Although there is considerable overlap between MACs and anti-heroes, academic literature has focused on the moral dimension of character perceptions in defining characters that are neither hero nor villain. Often, these character types are represented methodologically by particular instantiations of character types (e.g., using Jack Bauer from *24* as a morally ambiguous character). However, this approach may limit our understanding of broader character responses by confining viewer perceptions to one exemplar of a character type, since previous research has also outlined that there are many variations within and between characters (cf. Eden et al., 2015). One possible remedy would be to turn to existing categories and descriptions used by viewers to distinguish and describe anti-heroes from heroes, villains, and specific types of anti-heroes common in television, film, and books. One such arena, TV Tropes (<http://www.tvtropes.org>), is a popular website devoted to commonly used “tropes” in popular media. These tropes are character types and descriptions which appear across a broad swath of the media landscape, and may be considered to describe prototypical characters. A prototype is a listing of the most relevant features of a concept and allows us to understand abstract concepts in a concrete fashion (Cantor & Mischell, 1977). Recently, Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) examined prototypical features of heroes and concluded that heroes have a prototypic structure that communicates consistent information about the character features.

Relevant to the current study, TV Tropes has a comprehensive hero-to-villain continuum of character types describing and listing relevant features of anti-heroes (<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Analysis/AntiHero>). These types, from hero to villain, are structured as: Disney anti-heroes, classical anti-heroes, pragmatic anti-heroes, unscrupulous heroes, and nominal heroes (see Appendix A for description of these categories). These categories have been applied to thousands of media characters and are instantly recognizable via the use of both feature listing of the prototypical character type as well as exemplars in each category to identify and define category boundaries (cf. Medin & Smith, 1984). As a wiki, a web-based platform that allows users to edit content collectively, TV Tropes makes use of crowdsourced judgments, aggregating edits and social tagging to construct

categories over time (cf. Panke & Gaiser, 2009). This approach, although not without limitations, provides a consensus-driven process that can produce highly valid categorizations and typologies. Although this is not the only classification system possible in popular media, from a schematic perspective put forth by Raney (2004) and Sanders (2010), the spontaneous generation of these tropes, plus the notes and references used to describe and classify characters as falling into one or more of these categories, suggests some external validity to these character classifications. Importantly, this classification extends beyond morality to examine character motivation, common themes, and personality types in well-developed character schemas varying from hero to villain.

If anti-hero classification is driven primarily by moral considerations, as predicted by ADT, we will expect to see a linear trend in the anti-hero categories in terms of how participants categorize anti-heroes, with heroes being the most moral and villains the least moral, and the anti-heroes ranged in between. We will also see very little divergence in this pattern between different moral domains as described by Eden *et al.* (2015). However, if MACs are instead based in categories which are dependent on them violating specific domains of morality (as suggested by Eden *et al.*, 2015; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012) then we will expect to see different patterns of morality for each character type, in addition to an overall linear trend from good to bad (i.e., a pragmatic anti-hero, e.g., may harm people to achieve the greater good, whereas a Disney anti-hero will not). This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: Do MACs, as defined by the character tropes provided in popular media culture, exhibit variable morality based on specific moral dimensions demonstrated in previous research?

## CHARACTER MORALITY AND ENJOYMENT

One reason MACs are so interesting for media scholars is the direct linear relationship between morality and character liking proposed by ADT, and the paradox it poses to the popularity of media narratives featuring amoral characters. Several studies have shown anti-heroes are positively related to media enjoyment (Janicke & Raney, 2015; Shafer & Raney, 2012; Tsay & Krakowiak, 2011). Part of the issue may lie in the reliance on ADT to understand positive valuation of characters and subsequent emotional response. Disposition theories, at their inception, were primarily designed to explain enjoyment processes that ran counter to understandings of empathic reception. That is, Zillmann and Cantor (1977) and Zillmann and Bryant (1975) were attempting to explain how people could enjoy watching terrible things happen to characters, despite empathy for these characters. Dispositional override of empathic reactions was used to explain two important processes: The ability of viewers to tolerate watching punishments meted out to villains at the end of a story, and understanding how viewers could experience euphoric enjoyment



while watching the vicarious triumph of protagonists (see overviews in Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000).

Newer conceptualizations of enjoyment move past these hedonic conceptualizations of enjoyment to further explain positive reactions to media content. Indeed, they expand the concept of liking and enjoyment to encompass more complex understandings of positive evaluations of media content. For example, Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) found that *narrative engagement* derived from narrative comprehension, attention, presence, and emotional links to characters. Oliver (2008) and Oliver and Raney (2011) advocated the expansion of potential types of media gratifications to include *eudaimonic* gratifications. Eudaimonic motivations for media use are greater insight, self-reflection, or contemplations of poignancy or meaningfulness. Similarly, Vorderer and Ritterfeld (2009) consider *appreciation* the positive evaluation resulting from either conscious or unconscious rational processes in which one or more intrinsic higher-order needs are satisfied. This concept of appreciation as a media response is most often linked to meaningful or challenging media. Such media content focuses on questions of human moral virtues, demonstrates the lack of or conflict over such virtues, inspires insights concerning morality, or motivates the media user to contemplate or reflect on the meaning of life (Lewis et al., 2014; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010).

Appreciation has also been linked to the relationship between the self-concept and the perception of media characters. Appreciation responses are characterized by self-reflection, self-acceptance, self-development, and personal growth as a result of observing characters' experiences (Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Oliver, 2011; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). For example, the negative affect generated by watching characters' misfortunes in a tragic film was shown to trigger reflection regarding one's own self, personal relationships, and life happiness, which then produced "tragedy enjoyment" (Knobloch-Westerwick, Gong, Hagner, & Kerbeykian, 2013). Similar results from Bartsch, Kalch, and Oliver (2014) show that (mixed) affect leads to reflective thoughts (about the self, the character, and morality), which ultimately produces more positive film evaluations. Furthermore, involuntary autobiographical memories triggered by watching television were associated with moving feelings and lasting impressions, but not suspense, fun, or a single-item enjoyment measure (McDonald, Sarge, Lin, Collier, & Potocki, 2015). The appreciation of meaningful media has also been linked to mortality salience, that is, thoughts about one's own death. Thoughts about mortality and the meaning of life produce more appreciation in response to meaningful media, but less hedonic enjoyment (Hofer, 2013). Finally, Lewis et al. (2014) demonstrated that presenting conflicted morals in stories led to more deliberation about the story, and this deliberation or reflective processing was linked to increased appreciation for the story. Together, these findings suggest that appreciation is linked to self-reflective, deliberative processes resulting from exposure to media, which are separate from the positive hedonic response commonly known as enjoyment.



If we apply this broader conceptualization of appreciation to characters, it is clear that alternate conceptualizations of character may be required. The temporarily expanded boundaries of the self (TEBOTS; Slater et al., 2014) model offers one such framework. TEBOTS proposes that strains and limitations faced by the self-concept are the impetus for narrative engagement. People expand their sense of who they are by briefly living vicariously through characters, and transcending their own personal shortcomings by temporarily being a different self (Slater et al., 2014). In this way, the self-concept (and its limitations) generates appreciation (and other audience responses) by connecting to characters. Heroes, villains, and MACs might each provide unique ways in which boundaries can be expanded. Therefore, while morality may be more central to understanding character enjoyment, other processes, particularly those linked to the self-concept, may be more relevant to understanding character appreciation.

The following section outlines alternate models to understanding characters beyond pure morality, but instead by focusing on how the self relates to characters. Several conceptual approaches are relevant to this approach, such as *self-expansion* (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014; Slater et al., 2014), *wishful identification* (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), and *identification* (Cohen, 2001), and are discussed below.

## The Self and Characters

*Self-Expansion.* The TEBOTS model proposes that a process of self-expansion is essential to all narrative entertainment (Slater et al., 2014). Humans are thought to seek self-expansion as a way to manage threats, strains, and limitations related to the self-concept. Experiencing other possible selves, other lives, and other events allows the individual to transcend their own self-concept and its boundaries. TEBOTS claims that narrative allows for the vicarious satisfaction of intrinsic needs. Initial TEBOTS evidence shows that a strain on the self can increase narrative appreciation (as well as transportation and suspense; Johnson, Ewoldsen, & Slater, 2015). Also, research by Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014) demonstrated that exposure to narratives can increase self-expansion toward an ideal self. That study adapted a scale developed to measure self-expansion in interpersonal relationships (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013) in order to examine the relationship viewers have with characters.

It may be that MACs are able to allow for greater self-expansion than pure heroes and villains, given their more variable range of morality. For example, Tamborini et al. (2011) suggest that MACs vary in terms of the moral domains they uphold and violate. Specifically, in *Goodfellas*, they found that the moral domain of loyalty was upheld by even the darkest villain in the movie. MACs may uphold some moral domains better than others, and thus provide variable level of opportunity for self-expansion depending on the moral domain

central to that particular character. However, the fact that MACs uphold some domains while violating others may also be enough to promote self-expansion in viewers, as they try to understand character motives and consequences. This was discussed by Lewis et al. (2014), who argue that moral conflict may be more important to understanding the appeal of MACs than heroes and villains. MACs may provide opportunities for viewers to deliberate and expand upon their own moral concept via their own moral ambiguity and conflict.

*Wishful Identification.* Regardless of whether the self-concept is in need of temporary expansion, people may desire to become like other characters or to experience their lives. Wishful identification refers to the desire to be or to be like a character (Bond & Drogos, 2014; Feilitzen & Linné, 1975; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). The early study of potential determinants of wishful identification focused on character attributes (e.g., Reeves & Greenberg, 1977). Reviewing past studies, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) described several character attributes that have been linked to wishful identification. Researchers found that perceived character intelligence, success, and actual similarities can increase wishful identification with the media character (Eden et al., 2015; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). These studies focused on the attractive and good traits of media characters. Several studies have suggested that wishful identification is eventually determined by the perceived similarity between the viewer and the character in particular domains. These domains may be rooted in actual similarity, such as gender congruence between the viewer and the character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), as well as perceived similarity with an ideal or desired self in areas such as personality attributes (Feilitzen & Linné, 1975) or morality. If character attributes are examined through this lens of the ideal self, it is clear that attributes with inherently positive connotations are the ones driving a good deal of the perceived desire to be like characters.

*Identification.* In contrast to wishful identification, research on identification examines the extent to which readers or viewers take on the perspective of the character in the media, or the extent to which similarity between self and character exists in the reader's or viewer's mind. Cohen (2001) describes it as "an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character" (p. 261). However, there have been arguments against the concept of identification. Zillmann (2006) proposes that a distance is kept between the character and the media user. The identification scale (Cohen, 2001) has also shown limited predictive validity for enjoyment, compared to other immersion measures like transportation (Johnson et al., 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Thus, there has been a need for clear, simple measure of identification with a character. One approach is to directly measure the perceived level of actual similarity between the individual and the character, that is, *homophily* with the character (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; see also Cohen, 2001; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Another, more nuanced concept may be the *inclusion of other in*

*self*, which is the “cognitive overlap” between the self and some other entity. The inclusion of other in self (IOS) scale captures the degree of overlap with visual representations (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), such that greater inclusion entails greater similarity and identification with the other.

Shedloskey-Shoemaker et al. (2014) tested the IOS scale alongside the adapted self-expansion scale, and demonstrated that self-expansion was greater when characters represented an ideal self whereas cognitive overlap (IOS) was greater when characters represented an actual self (cf. Higgins, 1987). In this way, inclusion of self in other resembles homophily. It is how much the self is connected to the character. In contrast, wishful identification and self-expansion represent a desire or need to become like or live through a character. Therefore, it may be that homophily and IOS are linked more closely to traditional heroes and villains (i.e., we see ourselves as heroes and unlike villains) and are less tightly bound to MACs. On the other hand, previous research has pointed out that the perceived realism, flaws, and fallibility of MACs may make them easier to relate to and identify with (cf. Eden et al., 2011; Fitch, 2005; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005; Janicke & Raney, 2015; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012).

Last, how do expansion and identification relate to appreciation and enjoyment? There is limited support for identification as a predictor of narrative enjoyment or appreciation (Johnson et al., 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010); however, this could be a measurement issue given difficulties with the identification scale (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In other work, character identification increased videogame enjoyment, but this was attributed to interactivity and not necessarily to overlap with the character (Hefner, Klimmt, & Vorderer, 2007). So, examining measures of self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, and IOS will allow for comparing these related concepts and their influence on enjoyment and appreciation.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

It is clear that MACs may provoke different judgments and responses in viewers than pure heroes and villains. These responses may be better tied to broader conceptualizations of character perceptions and morality than simple good-versus-bad concerns, and may better predict appreciation responses than enjoyment responses in viewers. Therefore, the current study attempts to link our appreciation and enjoyment of MACs to concepts such as personal meaning, ideal self, and higher-order goals. That is, we propose that MAC valuation may be linked to variables involved in appreciation responses, in contrast to heroes and villains, whose valuation may be more strongly associated with moral concerns, and thus more strongly linked to enjoyment responses. Therefore, we propose two hypotheses:

H1: MACs will be associated with greater self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, and IOS than heroes or villains.

H2: Character type will be differentially associated with enjoyment versus appreciation responses to characters, such that MACs will be more strongly associated with appreciation, and heroes and villains with enjoyment.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were recruited via Novio Data, a Dutch market research bureau, in the last two weeks of October 2014. Participants ( $N = 294$ , 53.1% male) completed the online survey for payment. Participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old ( $M = 42.56$  years,  $SD = 12.7$ ).

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of seven character trope conditions and asked to think of a fictional character they considered to be a particularly strong example (Medin & Smith, 1984) of the prototypical description listed (from <http://www.tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Analysis/AntiHero>). Seven specific character descriptions, each of 50 words long, were modeled on the features described on TV Tropes: hero ( $n = 40$ ), Disney anti-hero ( $n = 43$ ), pragmatic anti-hero ( $n = 44$ ), classical anti-hero ( $n = 44$ ), unscrupulous anti-hero ( $n = 40$ ), nominal hero ( $n = 41$ ), and villain ( $n = 42$ ). See Appendix A for all descriptions, and most frequently selected characters in each category.

The subjects then identified the character they selected and listed the character's sex, age, and the origin of the character. After identifying their character, subjects completed a thought-listing task in which they were asked to think about this character, and "write a brief paragraph (3–6 sentences) describing the qualities and characteristics that make him/her fit this description. What is it that you [admire/despise] about the character?" After this thought-listing task, participants completed a short questionnaire where they evaluated the character on several dimensions including morality, self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, inclusion of other in self, and enjoyment and appreciation of the characters.

### Measures

*Character Morality Questionnaire.* Perceptions of the characters related to the five moral domains identified in research on moral foundations were

measured using the Character Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) (Eden et al., 2015). The Character MFQ consists of 15 items regarding character morality (e.g., “This person acts...”) rated along a 1 *strongly disagree* to 6 *strongly agree* scale. Three items were included for each domain. Example items include: “This person...” “...causes others to suffer emotionally” (care), “...acts unfairly” (fairness), “...shows a lack of respect for authority” (authority), “...shows a lack of loyalty” (loyalty), and “...violates standards of purity and decency” (purity).

To improve reliability, one item from each of the domains was dropped, leaving each domain being measured by two items. The final scale included the same 10 items (two for each factor) for all characters. Based on these considerations, scales for the five domains were computed for characters by averaging the items associated with each domain: care (two items,  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ), fairness (two items,  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ), loyalty (two items,  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ), authority (two items,  $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ), and purity (two items,  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). Scores on these scales were reverse coded so higher scores indicated greater violation of each moral domain.

*Self-Expansion.* To measure perceived self-expansion, we used the 14-item Self-Expansion Questionnaire (SEQ) (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014). For each item, participants rated how true they felt each statement was (e.g., “How much has this character resulted in your having new experiences?” “How much does this character make you more appealing to other people?”) from 1 *not at all true* to 7 *very true*,  $\alpha = .97$ ,  $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ .

*Wishful Identification.* To measure wishful identification, participants were asked, in a single-item measure, to state if they would like to be like the character (rated from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*,  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ).

*Homophily.* To measure perceived similarity to the character, participants were asked in a single-item measure to state if they felt they character was like them (rated from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*,  $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ).

*Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) Scale.* To measure degree of cognitive overlap with the self-selected character, participants completed the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), which is a one-item measure that includes seven different pictures varying the degree to which two circles overlap, as in a Venn diagram. Participants were told to imagine that one circle represented them and the other circle represented their chosen character. Participants were asked to select from the set of circles the one that best represented their relationship/overlap with the character. Higher numbers indicated greater degree of overlap between the two circles, suggesting that the participant and character had a greater self–other cognitive overlap,  $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ .

*Enjoyment and Appreciation.* Enjoyment and appreciation were measured using items adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Enjoyment was measured by three items adapted from the “fun” dimension (e.g., “I find it fun

to watch this character”) rated from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*,  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ . Appreciation was measured by combining the “moving/thought-provoking” and “lasting impression” dimensions, based on the strong inter-item relationship of all items (e.g., “This character is meaningful to me,” “I thought about this character for a long time”), rated from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*,  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ .

## RESULTS

To address RQ1, we first examined the moral foundations scores by domain across each character type in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with the five moral domains as dependent variables and the seven character types as independent variable. There were significant differences between character types across all five dimensions of morality, with heroes perceived as the most moral and villains the least, in the order suggested by TV Tropes,  $F(5, 244) = 20.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , Roy’s largest root = .42, (see Table 1 for all descriptives and univariate  $F$  tests). The one exception was the classical anti-hero, who was not significantly different from the hero character type in any moral domain (all  $p > .05$ ). Placing the classical anti-hero directly after hero, we are left with linear trends for each moral domain along the continuum from hero to villain (see Figure 1).

That said, it is notable that group loyalty is perceived to be much less violated than the other four moral domains by pragmatic anti-heroes, unscrupulous anti-heroes, nominal heroes, and villains. However, this suggests something distinct about group loyalty as a moral domain, rather than the characters that uphold or violate group loyalty. From these results, we suggest that in contrast to the dimensional model of MACs proposed by Eden et al. (2015) and Tamborini et al. (2011), MACs may be best considered as variations along a continuum of morality ranging from very good to very bad. Given this finding, in addressing the subsequent research questions we combined the five measures of morality into one composite measure of moral violations,  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ . Additionally, given the similarity of the classical anti-hero to the traditional hero, all subsequent ordered analyses place the classical anti-hero next to the hero in terms of morality.

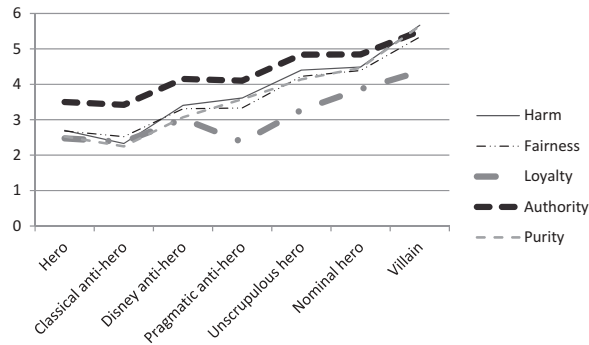
To address Hypothesis 1, a between-subjects MANOVA was conducted, with character trope as the independent variable and the dependent measures of self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, and IOS (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and univariate tests). While the univariate  $F$  tests were significant for homophily and wishful identification, closer examination of the Bonferonni post hoc tests shows that this effect was primarily due to low scores for the villains compared to the other character types (all  $p < .05$ ) rather than significant differences between MACs. Therefore, it seems the character tropes selected are not a strong predictor of these character identification variables. Examining the overall trends, as well, there is no significant

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics for Morality, Self-Expansion, and Identification, and Enjoyment and Appreciation, by Character Type

Variable	Hero		Classical anti-hero		Disney anti-hero		Pragmatic anti-hero		Unscrupulous hero		Nominal hero		Villain	
	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Harm	2.70 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.78)	2.33 <sup>a</sup>	(1.32)	3.41 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.74)	3.61 <sup>bcd</sup>	(1.33)	4.40 <sup>c</sup>	(1.55)	4.49 <sup>cd</sup>	(1.83)	5.67 <sup>e</sup>	(1.42)
Fairness	2.68 <sup>a</sup>	(1.78)	2.52 <sup>a</sup>	(1.32)	3.31 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.49)	3.33 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.36)	4.23 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.46)	4.39 <sup>cd</sup>	(1.51)	5.33 <sup>d</sup>	(1.44)
Loyalty	2.48 <sup>a</sup>	(1.92)	2.38 <sup>a</sup>	(1.52)	3.02 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.59)	2.38 <sup>a</sup>	(1.16)	3.28 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.62)	3.87 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.59)	4.36 <sup>c</sup>	(1.37)
Authority	3.50 <sup>a</sup>	(1.85)	3.42 <sup>a</sup>	(1.46)	4.15 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.60)	4.10 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.45)	4.84 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.62)	4.84 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.56)	5.50 <sup>c</sup>	(1.37)
Purity	2.53 <sup>a</sup>	(1.62)	2.25 <sup>a</sup>	(1.28)	3.07 <sup>ab</sup>	(1.66)	3.58 <sup>bc</sup>	(1.54)	4.14 <sup>c</sup>	(1.78)	4.46 <sup>c</sup>	(1.72)	5.64 <sup>d</sup>	(1.30)
Self-expansion	2.99	(1.42)	3.39	(1.38)	3.45	(1.49)	3.36	(1.37)	3.54	(1.47)	3.31	(1.61)	2.91	(1.52)
Wishful ID	3.58 <sup>a</sup>	(1.78)	3.34 <sup>a</sup>	(1.79)	3.16 <sup>a</sup>	(1.69)	3.59 <sup>a</sup>	(1.76)	3.50 <sup>a</sup>	(2.05)	2.76 <sup>a</sup>	(1.79)	2.07 <sup>b</sup>	(1.63)
Homophily	2.88 <sup>a</sup>	(1.64)	3.07 <sup>a</sup>	(1.48)	2.63 <sup>a</sup>	(1.72)	3.07 <sup>a</sup>	(1.65)	2.90 <sup>a</sup>	(1.74)	2.29 <sup>a</sup>	(1.84)	2.07 <sup>a</sup>	(1.44)
IOS	2.33	(1.62)	2.27	(1.44)	2.40	(1.59)	2.07	(1.50)	2.05	(1.65)	1.83	(1.53)	1.62	(1.15)
Enjoyment	5.25 <sup>a</sup>	(1.41)	5.29 <sup>a</sup>	(1.21)	5.16 <sup>a</sup>	(1.26)	4.82 <sup>a</sup>	(1.62)	4.78 <sup>a</sup>	(1.52)	4.45 <sup>a</sup>	(1.71)	3.97 <sup>b</sup>	(1.74)
Appreciation	4.11 <sup>a</sup>	(1.62)	4.23 <sup>a</sup>	(1.23)	4.13 <sup>a</sup>	(1.33)	4.41 <sup>a</sup>	(1.38)	4.23 <sup>a</sup>	(1.54)	3.77 <sup>b</sup>	(1.49)	3.43 <sup>c</sup>	(1.47)

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Superscripts denote Bonferroni post hoc differences between character types,  $p < .05$ .

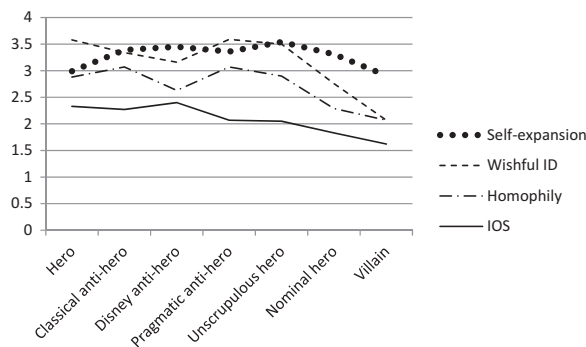




**FIGURE 1** Morality by character type across five domains of morality. *Note.* The y-axis represents extent of moral violation.

linear or nonlinear trend between heroes, villains, and MACs (see Figure 2); that is, MACs are neither more nor less strongly associated with self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, or inclusion of other in self than are pure heroes and villains.

Hypothesis 2 proposed we could differentiate enjoyment versus appreciation responses based on character type and character attributes. In order to test this hypothesis, two steps were taken. In the first step, two analyses of variance were conducted with character trope as the independent variable and perceptions of enjoyment and appreciation as the dependent variables. Character trope was significantly related to both enjoyment and appreciation (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and *F* tests). However, examination of the post hoc tests showed that, for enjoyment, this relationship was primarily due to large differences between villains and all other character types (see Table 1), and the significant results for appreciation primarily due to differences between villains and pragmatic anti-heroes.



**FIGURE 2** Identification across character type.

**TABLE 2** Pearson's Correlations of Predictor Variables

	Character type	Self-expansion	Wishful ID	Homophily	IOS
Character type	—				
Self-expansion	−0.02	—			
Wishful ID	−.23**	.64**	—		
Homophily	−.15*	.62**	.76**	—	
IOS	−.17**	.48**	.52**	.55**	—
Moral violation total	.52**	−0.04	−.19**	−.14*	−0.09

*Note.* For character type, the order is hero, classical anti-hero, Disney anti-hero, pragmatic anti-hero, unscrupulous hero, nominal hero, and villain. All other variables are continuous.

In the second step, correlations between all variables were examined (Table 2). Next, two separate regression analyses were conducted predicting enjoyment and appreciation from character type, moral violation, self-expansion, wishful identification, homophily, and inclusion of other in self in a stepwise model with character type entered in the first step, perception measures in the second, and moral violation in the third (see Table 3). For enjoyment, character type did predict enjoyment, however when including the perception measures and moral violation in the model, character type was no longer a significant predictor of enjoyment. Of the character variables, self-expansion, wishful identification, and moral violation were all predictive of enjoyment. For appreciation, a similar pattern was found, such that character type did not predict appreciation significantly once self-expansion and wishful identification were entered in the model. Unlike enjoyment, moral violation was not related to the appreciation variable.

DISCUSSION

The overarching goals of the study were to a) examine the role of morality in understanding perceptions of characters who are not simple heroes and villains; b) test alternate conceptualizations of these characters based on media as an exercise in self-understanding; and c) examine how these alternate understandings of characters are differentially linked to enjoyment and appreciation. Findings suggest that character type does not seem to be schematically based as suggested by Sanders (2010) or Raney (2004), at least not in the categories of MACs promoted by lay understandings of characters found on a popular media tropes website. This may be explained by the choice of prototypes that we used. While often layperson understandings of prototypes can aid us in identifying underlying grouping principles, they do not always exactly match with each other. Additionally, the spectrum of morally ambiguous characters may offer too diverse a range of distinguishing features to capture in short descriptions evoking common prototypes. Therefore,

**TABLE 3** Regression Analysis Predicting Enjoyment and Appreciation

	Enjoyment					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$
Character type	−0.19 (.045)	−0.26***	−.14 (.04)	−.19**	−.07 (.05)	−.09
Self-expansion			.24(.08)	.22**	.25 (.08)	.23**
Wishful ID			.32(.07)	.37***	.29(.07)	.34***
Homophily			−.12(.08)	−.12	−.12(.08)	−.12
IOS			.01(.07)	−.01	−.02(.07)	−.02
Moral violation					−.19(.06)	−.19**
<i>F</i>	17.52***		17.96***		16.88***	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.06		.26		.29	
$\Delta R^2$			.20***		.03**	

	Appreciation					
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SEb</i> )	$\beta$
Character type	−0.10 (0.04)	−0.15*	−.06 (.03)	−.09*	−.05 (.03)	−.07
Self-expansion			.59(.06)	.58***	.59 (.06)	.59***
Wishful ID			.18(.06)	.22**	.17(.06)	.21*
Homophily			−.01(.06)	−.01	−.01(.06)	−.01
IOS			−.05(.05)	−.01	−.04(.05)	−.01
Moral violation					−.05(.05)	−.05
<i>F</i>	6.01*		62.73***		52.52***	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.02		.56		.56	
$\Delta R^2$			.54***		.002	

Notes. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

For character type, the order is hero, classical anti-hero, Disney anti-hero, pragmatic anti-hero, unscrupulous hero, nominal hero, and villain. All other variables are continuous.

understanding the underlying principles that influence all character perceptions may be more important than being able to classify tropes. Rather than form a typology of discrete categories, the viewer-defined anti-hero definitions from TV Tropes was indicative of a probabilistic continuum (cf. Medin & Smith, 1984) of hero to villain, with the varied anti-hero tropes falling at progressive points between those two absolutes.

As suggested by Sanders (2010), schemas may depend on the perceptions of character morality. Morality does seem to be an underlying organizational tool for characters, and is also strongly related to enjoyment responses. This is in line with copious past research illustrating the central role of morality in media enjoyment. On the other hand, morality was not related to appreciation in the same way. Unlike Lewis et al. (2014), who suggested appreciation may result from conflicted moral needs, the current findings suggests that enjoyment and appreciation are associated with different perceptions of

characters. While these processes may be related to moral ambiguity or conflict, we do not see evidence for that in the current study.

Instead, these results reflect more closely a recent TEBOTS study (Johnson et al., 2015), which found that strains on the self induced before media use led to more appreciation and overall enjoyment, but not to significantly more fun (hedonic enjoyment). Self-expansion, in which the individual is motivated to take a character's perspective or gain vicarious experiences, can produce different kinds of audience responses, but the strongest effect may be seen on eudaimonic appreciation responses, versus hedonic enjoyment. This supports a dimensional need-satisfaction model of enjoyment and appreciation as suggested by Vorderer and Ritterfeld (2009) and recently empirically tested by Oliver et al. (2015). This model differentiates appreciation and enjoyment based on the psychological needs that are satisfied by the media. Oliver et al. (2015) found that different attributes of video games predicted enjoyment versus appreciation. Enjoyment was predicted by the experience of competence and autonomy while playing the game, whereas appreciation responses were strongly predicted by the experience of relatedness, insight, and meaning while playing. Appreciation was additionally linked to story- and character-related variables in game, while enjoyment was predicted by physical features such as game sounds and the play experience. Oliver et al. (2015) suggest that this indicates different functional roles for enjoyment and appreciation in understanding media evaluation.

Therefore, it is not surprising that we find different responses for enjoyment and appreciation based on the needs satisfied by characters. Enjoyment, which has been traditionally linked to justice concerns in media (Zillmann, 2000), was also linked in our study to the perceived morality of characters. However, morality was not predictive of appreciation responses towards characters. While these results are preliminary, they do suggest that we appreciate and enjoy characters for different reasons, with morality strongly linked to enjoyment responses. Self-expansion was associated with both appreciation and enjoyment. However, the magnitude of the effect on appreciation was much stronger, and more comparable in magnitude to the effect of morality on enjoyment. This provides support for the idea that morality drives enjoyment while self-expansion drives appreciation. Intriguingly, wishful identification, which is conceptually similar to self-expansion, was related to both enjoyment and appreciation, although at lower levels. Future work should investigate why wishful identification is not uniquely associated with one versus the other response. Therefore, we must further examine predictors of character appreciation which may be unique when compared to character enjoyment. It was also notable that homophily and IOS, which appear to represent similarity with a character rather than motivations to be like or experience a character, were not related to enjoyment or appreciation.

As Oliver et al. (2015) suggest, the psychological needs identified by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001) may be strong contenders in terms

of functional needs leading to appreciation. Ryan and Deci (2001) identify three psychological needs—the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that when satisfied may lead to the integration of values into the self in an eudaimonic fashion. The need for insight or meaning may be understood as the successful meeting of these three needs, although Oliver et al. (2015) also found that the need for insight was a separate and significant predictor of appreciation responses on top of the need satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The TEBOOTS model also emphasizes the satisfaction of these intrinsic needs, through the vicarious experience of self-expansion (Slater et al., 2014). The current study presented here focused on wishful identification and self-expansion as a representation of the self in appreciation processes, but future research should also examine insight and relatedness needs as precursors of appreciation.

Although the findings here are of clear import in adding to our understandings of how we perceive characters in terms of enjoyment and appreciation processes, there are some limitations to the study that should be addressed. First, these findings relied on character tropes from one popular website. As noted, these tropes were not significantly different from each other beyond the linear relationship with morality. Therefore, other, hopefully more predictive, character schemas must be identified in future research. Clearly, hero and villain schemas are well established (cf. Kinsella et al., 2015), but gaining a better understanding of all the other shades of character is important for future research. Second, characters to fit the tropes were selected by the viewers themselves. Although this approach has its strengths, drawing from existing viewer perceptions and schemas (Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman, & Davis, 2002), and accordingly following the procedure used in Eden et al. (2015) by giving participants sample characters in each trope, it may have limited the specific examples of characters provided by participants. Additionally, there was strong overlap in specific characters (such as Spiderman) selected by participants assigned different anti-heroic tropes. This may be because the tropes used were not sufficiently distinct for viewers to recognize and nominate characters who fit each particular category. Alternatively, it could be that viewers were picking and choosing select moments in each character's story that fit the particular trope identified. For example, Spiderman may at some points resemble the classical anti-hero, and at other times a Disney anti-hero. So, more research is required into how and why viewers selected particular characters to fit each trope, as well as how viewers will perceive and evaluate characters that are not self-selected. Future research could manipulate character attributes to more carefully hone in on features connected to tropes and moral dimensions. Finally, the classical anti-hero was indistinguishable from the hero on the morality continuum. This raises the question if heroes and classical anti-heroes are distinct categories or if they are simply different varieties of hero, in contrast to MACs.

That said, our study is one of the first to use a categorical approach (as suggested by Medin & Smith, 1984) to define and describe MACs. Although the typology chosen was not as clear-cut as we may have hoped, it still offers insights into character appreciation processes that may be carried forward. Future research should continue to examine layperson understanding of MACs as separate from heroes and villains to better understand the naturally occurring categories of characters, and what those characters may mean to viewers.

Our findings also suggest that morality may be seen as uni-dimensional in terms of character perceptions, despite the dimensional models of morality suggested as relevant in previous work. We do not discount this previous work, but we would suggest caution in interpreting dimensional explanations of MACs given our findings. Indeed, in contrast to previous work, we did not find moral conflict as a defining characteristic of MACs, at least in terms of domain-based morality found in moral foundations theory (e.g., Haidt & Joseph, 2008). Therefore, in future studies, the extent to which the characters provoked moral deliberation or moral conflict in viewers may be taken as a separate indicator of morality, versus the extent to which characters uphold or violate specific domains. This would be a more accurate reflection of the argument set forth by Lewis et al. (2014), particularly. Finally, our findings support the notion that morality as a whole is central to enjoyment processes, but less central to appreciation processes. The role of specific needs satisfied by characters in both enjoyment and appreciation processes must be better clarified and understood, and our study begins to do so with the findings presented here.

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APPENDIX A

Most Common Characters Per Character Type

Type	Most-mentioned characters	Character description
Hero	Superman	<i>This type of character is a character who is always right, selflessly fights for noble causes, is kind to all and is a natural and charismatic leader. He successfully fights against evil, saves those in distress and always reaches his predefined goals.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Luke Skywalker from <i>Star Wars</i> and Superman
Disney anti-hero	Shrek	<i>This type of character has heroic intentions but often have a sour, cynical view of the world. This type of character stands a good chance of positive transformation over the course of the story, once they confront their internal conflicts, or find someone or something they want to fight for.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Shrek and Tyrion Lannister from <i>Game of Thrones</i>
Pragmatic anti-hero	Robin Hood	<i>This type of character is willing to do immoral things for a good cause. In their view, the end justify (the where necessary violent) means. The intentions of these characters are pure and good and the abide by a strict personal moral code, which they follow in reaching their goals.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Katniss Everdeen from <i>The Hunger Games</i> and Batman
Classical anti-hero	Karate Kid	<i>This type of character is full of self-doubt, mediocre (or worse) in combat, has trouble seeing the whole picture, unsuccessful in love, frightened, cowardly and/or not particularly bright. He or she tends to “grow” over the course of the narrative and overcomes his or her own weaknesses.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Elsa from the movie <i>Frozen</i> and Spiderman
Unscrupulous hero	James Bond	<i>This type of character will fight for the good cause out of good intentions. However, they are unaffected by the collateral effects and damages they create along the way. They live according to a code, are often violent (in pursuit of justice and vengeance), are cynical (due to personal trauma) as well as opportunistic.”</i> Examples of this type of character are: Jack Bauer from <i>24</i> and Mad Max from the similarly-titled movies.
Nominal hero	Hannibal Lecter	<i>Even though this type of character fights on the side of good, their intentions/motivations are anything but pure or good (often focused on selfish goals). This type of character is often seen through the lens of the enemy of my enemy – the lesser of two evils.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Dexter Morgan (from <i>Dexter</i> the TV-show) and Loki from the Marvel universe ( <i>Thor</i> , <i>The Avengers</i> )
Villain	The Joker	<i>This type of character is the one that works against the good guys, is characterized and even admired for his or her determination in being evil, having selfish goals, cunning and intelligence. Nevertheless this character almost never reaches his or her goal, is almost always beaten or vanquished and fails in his or her evil intentions.</i> Examples of this type of character are: Sauron (from <i>Lord of the Rings</i> ) and Darth Vader from <i>Star Wars</i>